Action on Ageing: A Progress Report

It has been ten years since the International Plan of Action on Aging was adopted by representatives of 124 United Nations Member States with a host of non-governmental organizations at the World Assembly on Aging in Vienna. The Plan sets out broad principles and recommendations on meeting the needs of the elderly, listening to their voices while developing policy and keeping older people in the mainstream of society. How have the elderly fared since the 1982 Assembly? Is the world better equipped to adapt to the rapid increase of older people and the growing portion of the population who will reach 60 years of age as each decade goes by?

"As far as ageing goes, there is a big knowledge gap," says Sandeep Chawla, chief technical adviser to the Ageing Policies and Programmes Unit of the United Nations Office at Vienna (UNOV), which serves as the United Nations focal point on ageing. "Demographics are very sophisticated in terms of how many people there are and which sectors will experience how much growth. But when you get to what the actual conditions of life are, you hit a blank wall, especially in terms of the developing countries, where the majority of the elderly are."

The sentiment is echoed by HelpAge International's Mark Gorman. "We know about the rise of the ageing population," he says, "but we don't know what it means."

Steps are being taken to close the knowledge gap. A Special Programme for Research on Ageing was established in 1989 at the World Health Organization (WHO) to analyse the factors contributing to healthy ageing, as well as questions relating to nutrition, dementias of ageing and the immune system and ageing. And the UNOV's Ageing Unit assisted by the United Nations Fund for Population Activities (UNFPA), is carrying out intensive studies of selected countries from the developing world. Statistics have been gathered in Chile, the Dominican Republic, Sri Lanka and Thailand, and a second phase will look at four more countries from West Asia and Africa.

"We need hard data on how older people are living and what they are doing to be able to design intelligent programmes to reach them," says Mr. Chawla.

A major concern of the International Plan of Action on Ageing is that older people receive basic necessities: income, food, housing and health care. None of these is guaranteed to older people in the less developed countries who are unable to work, and those who are working cannot take them for granted either. Even in prosperous countries, gaps in social security coverage allow many older people to become destitute and abandoned.

Dalmer Hoskins, secretary-general of the International Social Security Association, notes that only a minority in the developing world are eligible for pensions, and that coverage is slipping in many countries in Latin America and Africa. Contributions to pension funds are up, however, in many of the poorer countries of South Asia.

There are reassuring accounts of the resiliency of family support mechanisms for older people, but also accounts of overburdened families and the appearance, for the first time in many countries, of large numbers of homeless elderly persons.

Virtually all nations have some provisions for health care for the indigent, but the extent of actual

protection is patchy. A doctor stationed in a rural area in Latin America plagued by poverty, civil strife and illicit drug trafficking, for instance, reports that anyone can receive free treatment at the hospital where he works. But because drugs and equipment are lacking, little can be done to cure infectious diseases rampant among the elderly.

"When they leave the hospital," the doctor says, "they go home to pray and to die."

There is general agreement, none the less, that the 1982 World Assembly, and looming demographic trends, have called attention to an issue that was previously disregarded as a matter of public policy. Even leaders who remain concerned about the tendency of societies to marginalize their older populations note hopeful trends.

"We're starting to catch the first glimmer of international interest," says Mark Gorman, director of development at HelpAge International, "as the question of ageing creeps onto the bottom of the ladder of the policy agenda. We get questions about the kinds of legislation to propose, economic and social policies, and so on. Governments are beginning to look at the statistics and realize that down the road there's going to be a real crunch."

"My impression is that the World Assembly was instrumental in raising consciousness worldwide," reports Charlotte Nusberg, secretary-general of the International Federation on Ageing (IFA). "In terms of implementation, there have been steps forward and steps backward. One good sign is that we've seen a lot more assertiveness on the part of older people, although mostly in the developed countries."

Some of this assertiveness is reflected in a 1992 vote by the European Parliament to increase its spending on the elderly for that year to 4.3 million ecus (almost $ US 5.5 million)—mostly on care and housing arrangements which stimulate independence and societal integration of the elderly and socially useful application of the experience and skill of older persons—two and a half times as much as the previous year's budget. The European Community has declared 1993 the European Year of Older Persons and Solidarity between the Generations.

In Africa, where according to Nana Apt of the University of Ghana the elderly have been hit hard by the economy of the last decade, initiatives also are under way. Dr. Apt, an organizer for the rights of older persons, says, "There has been progress for single elderly women—'old maids', as they are called—in so far as antiquated laws regarding matters like inheritance and property rights are being looked at. In Kenya and Ethiopia, the Governments are giving assistance to families who care for the aged. There has been progress in literacy—and illiteracy is a critical problem, because it keeps people out of the decision making process, out of the political and economic realms."

Dr. Denise Eldermire, executive director of HelpAge Jamaica, cites developments like positive coverage by the national media and incorporation of the concerns of the ageing in the work of the Jamaican Planning Institute. "While the elderly command respect within the family," she says, "in society as a whole, old age has a negative image. But that is being broken down."

Building infrastructure

One of the key initiatives to come out of the 1982 World Assembly is the establishment of national mechanisms on ageing. National mechanisms—"that elegant phrase," sighs the IFA's Charlotte Nusberg—are coordinating committees composed of representatives of appropriate government bodies, non-governmental service organizations and organizations of and for the elderly themselves. So far 93 such networks have been established.

The achievements of the national machineries will be limited, of course, if investment in social and economic development is being cut back. But even under the harsh budgetary circumstances so many countries have experienced in recent years, these coordinating bodies represent a step forward. In the leading industrialized countries, where the ageing phenomenon is already under way, the activities of national machineries focus the diversity of institutional capacities that have already been established, work to extend policy coverage to subgroups who have been excluded or overlooked and seek new ways to secure the participation of the elderly. In most of the developing countries, on the other hand, rapid expansion of the ageing population lies a few de-

cades ahead. National machineries provide an opportunity— sometimes the first opportunity—to articulate a policy stance and establish institutional frameworks for formulation and implementation.

Further steps have been taken to translate the "plan" part of the Plan of Action into "action".

In 1988 the International Institute on Ageing, based in Malta, was founded. Supported by the Maltese Government, United Nations specialized agencies and bodies and other governmental and non-governmental contributors, the Institute defines its mission as fulfilling the training needs of developing countries and acting as a bridge between the developed and developing nations. The Institute conducts original research into demographic and developmental questions, publishes research and training materials, holds internationally attended seminars and workshops and provides a range of technical cooperation services. At the suggestion of the Government of the Dominican Republic, consideration is being given to establishing a similar institute to serve the needs of Latin American and Caribbean nations. And in Asia, two such institutes are under consideration.

The African Society of Gerontology, established in 1989, is one of the newest actors in international ageing. The United Nations General Assembly has urged agencies and bodies around the world to support the society in establishing a regional programme on ageing for the period 1992 to 2001.

The United Nations Trust Fund for Ageing, established at the beginning of the past decade, supports projects with seed money that in turn attracts additional resources from foundations and Governments. Another international funding source is the recently created Banyan Fund. It takes its name from the tropical banyan tree, which drops aerial roots from its branches to form new trunks and ensure longevity, self-reliance and continuing growth. Appropriately, the Banyan Fund specializes in promoting self-help initiatives by the elderly, their families and their communities.

As a result of the 1982 World Assembly, the United Nations established a focal point for coordination on issues of ageing. The Ageing Policies and Programmes Unit operates out of the United Nations Office at Vienna/Centre for Social Development and Humanitarian Affairs and is concerned with meshing the activities and plans of a multitude of United Nations and other international bodies. Prominent among these are non-governmental organizations like the International Federation on Ageing, HelpAge International and the American Association of Retired Persons; organizations established in cooperation with the United Nations such as the International Institute on Ageing in Malta and the International Social Security Association, based in Geneva; United Nations departments dealing with development, population and statistics; and specialized United Nations agencies, among which are the International Labour Organisation, the World Health Organization, UNESCO and the Food and Agriculture Organization.

Published by the United Nations Department of Public Information
DPI/1254— August 1992— 5M